

Who Did What in the Roman Republic

By Vickie Chao

Democracy, by definition, means rule by people. Both the word and the concept itself came from Greece a long time ago. When the Romans revolted and expelled the Etruscan king, Tarquin the Proud, in 510 B.C. (some say 509 B.C.), they vowed never to be governed by emperors again. Thus, they borrowed the Greek idea of democracy and created the Roman Republic.

In the Roman Republic, power was in the hands of two consuls. Once a year, the Romans gathered together and elected two capable men to be their consuls. The election was open to all Roman *male* citizens. Women, slaves, foreigners, and people born in provinces were not allowed to vote.

Though in theory consuls had a lot of say on state affairs, their actual authority was quite limited. There are several reasons for it. First, the term of consuls lasted only one year. The short serving period made it hard for any one person to gain enough influence. Second, before any action was taken, the two consuls must attempt to reach an agreement. If one opposed an idea, he could simply say "veto" ("I forbid") and have the matter dropped. Third, after their one-year stint as the top officials, consuls became members of the senate. Senators in the Roman Republic were not law-makers. They were consuls' advisors. They normally served for life. Because of this special "retirement benefit," consuls almost always did what the senate wanted them to do. After all, they would not want to anger their future co-workers by refusing to listen to them.



Of course, despite the enticement of being future senators, having two consuls agree on everything was impossible. To avoid one abusing his veto power, a Roman law gave the senate the right to choose a dictator in the event of an emergency. The law specified the term of a dictator to be six months.

Consuls were not the only publicly elected officers. As the Roman citizens voted for their ideal candidates for consuls, they also voted for other bureaucrats.

Once a year, they chose 8 praetors, 4 aediles, and 20 quaestors. Praetors were judges. They would assume consuls' administrative duties in their absence. Aediles were the organizers of public games. They were also the supervisors of public places. Quaestors were the financial administrators or treasurers.

Once every five years, they chose 2 censors. Censors served a term of 18 months. Their primary responsibilities were to remove any unworthy senators and to enroll the new ones. They were also in charge of assessing property tax, granting contracts for public works, and conducting census of citizens.

Under the Roman law, dictator, consuls, or praetors had the right to exercise *imperium*. *Imperium* was the utmost form of power. It included the right to command armies, to interpret and carry out the law, and to give out death sentences. As a show of their status, dictator, consuls, or praetors were permitted to wear purple-trimmed robes and sit on ivory folding chairs. Both privileges were traditionally reserved for emperors only. Censors and the two most senior aediles could wear purple-trimmed robes and sit on ivory folding chairs, too. But they could not exercise *imperium*.

In the early days of the Roman Republic, only patricians could become senators or hold senior government posts. Patricians were nobles or people from affluent families. They represented the Roman society's upper class. Their tight grip on power made the commoners or plebeians very uneasy. After rounds of strikes and protests, plebeians set up their own assembly and elected tribunes to see to their welfare. Their struggles paid off gradually. The first plebeian consul was appointed in 366 B.C., the first plebeian dictator 356 B.C., the first plebeian censor 351 B.C., and the first plebeian praetor 337 B.C. Later in history, plebeians' assembly consolidated legislative power from all other assemblies. The laws made by its 10 tribunes became the laws that all Roman citizens - no matter if they were patricians or plebeians - must follow. As impressive as those improvements appeared to be, plebeians never managed to outdo patricians. Therefore, their share of control in

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administration remained insubstantial.

The Roman Republic came to a halt in 27 B.C. when Octavian won the civil war that had been raging for more than a decade. The victory won him both fame and support. The senate gave him the title of Augustus, which means "highly respected." It also gave him full control over Rome, effectively making him an emperor. Though Augustus never coined the term "Roman Empire," historians all agree that he was the first king of this new era. After nearly 500 years, Rome came full circle and returned to the hands of monarchy.

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Questions

- _____ 1. Which position in the Roman Republic had the most power?
 - A. Praetor
 - B. Consul
 - C. Dictator
 - D. Censor
- _____ 2. Which of the following positions in the Roman Republic had the longest term?
 - A. Consul
 - B. Censor
 - C. Dictator
 - D. Praetor
- _____ 3. Which government official in the Roman Republic was in charge of organizing public sports?
 - A. Quaestor
 - B. Aedile
 - C. Censor
 - D. Praetor
- _____ 4. The senate could appoint a dictator if the two consuls disagreed with each other.
 - A. False
 - B. True
- _____ 5. Who in the Roman Republic had the right to vote and become a consul?
 - A. All Roman female citizens
 - B. All Roman male citizens
 - C. Foreigners
 - D. Everybody
- _____ 6. For how many years did the Roman Republic last?
 - A. 271 years
 - B. 920 years
 - C. 392 years
 - D. 483 years

- _____ 7. Which of the following government officials in the Roman Republic did NOT have the right to exercise *imperium*?
- A. Praetor
 - B. Censor
 - C. Dictator
 - D. Consul
- _____ 8. A senator in the Roman Republic could never lose his seat in the senate.
- A. True
 - B. False
- _____ 9. Who in the Roman Republic were responsible for making laws?
- A. Praetors
 - B. Tribunes
 - C. Quaestors
 - D. Consuls
- _____ 10. Who ended the Roman Republic?
- A. Julius Caesar
 - B. Genghis Khan
 - C. Alexander the Great
 - D. Augustus

Compare and contrast the Roman Republic senate and the United State senate.

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